

## How Can I Explain the Gospel?

For years, even decades, I was scared to share the gospel.

I learned the Four Spiritual Laws, the ABCs of faith and the Two Ways to Live booklets, but I was still afraid that when I explained the gospel in conversation, I'd miss something critical. Or that I'd string together the Scriptures I knew without making sense. Or mostly that I'd be asked a question I couldn't answer.

I remember talking to a non-Christian friend who asked me to explain the gospel. Nervously, I flew through everything I knew, saying something like this, "God is holy and just and righteous (Is 5:16) and created the world for himself, that everything would honor and glorify him (Rev 4:11). Yet we went our own way, sinning against God and each other (Is 53:6; Rom 3:23) so we couldn't have a relationship with him, either on this earth or in heaven. But God wanted to reconcile with us and so he sent his son Jesus to lead a sinless life and then die on a cross in our place (Rom 5:8-10), so that we could have eternal life with him (Rom 6:23). Our part is to believe and repent (Acts 3:19) and God will save us (Rom 10:9-11)." I paused to take a breath. "Does that make sense?"

She shook her head. "No. It doesn't make sense. And I don't believe or understand the Bible, so I don't want you to give me Bible verses to explain it. But can you explain how Christ's death makes up for what I've done wrong? How does that work?"

A deafening silence followed. I had Bible references I hadn't mentioned to back up my words, but she didn't want those. I had learned analogies, but I couldn't remember exactly how they went. I stumbled through an answer but wished I had been clearer. The idea of substitutionary atonement, that Christ's death on the cross fully paid the penalty of our sins, is the crux of the gospel. Under pressure, it was hard to explain in simple terms.

Our pastor recently explained the gospel through a simple analogy that was more straightforward than anything I had heard before. He said, "It's as if we all have a paper with our name at the top and underneath is a record of the sins we have committed. For each of us, that list would be incredibly long."

I cringed when I considered what that paper would contain. It would be tens of thousands of pages since it would include everything I've thought, everything I've done, and everything I have not done. The unkind ways I've gossiped. The lies I've told to protect myself. The angry words I've snapped at my children. The jealousy I've felt when others have surpassed me. The indifference I've shown to the suffering of others. The doubt I've harbored about God's provision for me. The desire to build my own kingdom and not God's. The list is endless as I consider all the ways I've failed to love and honor God and failed to love my neighbor.

Our pastor went on to say, "In the analogy, Jesus has a piece of paper too. He has his name at the top and underneath are all the sins that he committed. His paper, of course, would be blank

because he lived a sinless life. At the cross, Jesus exchanged his paper with ours. He crossed out our name from our paper with all our sins listed and wrote his name in our place. And he took that paper to the cross where God poured his wrath out on Jesus for us. In exchange, Jesus put our name at the top of his perfect paper. So now when God looks at us, he sees Christ's sinless record.

That simple picture made the gospel so clear. That is why God sees Christ's righteousness when he looks at us. We have Christ's paper. His righteousness. His perfect obedience. God does not hold our sin against us. He will never punish us because he has already punished Jesus for our sin (2 Cor 5:21).

Christ did for us what we could not do for ourselves and because of that, we will live with him forever. God will never turn his back on us. Never not be "for" us. Never fail us. Never leave us. Never punish us. Never stop loving us.

Jesus had each one of us in mind when he went to the cross. He chose us before the foundation of the world. Paul Tripp says it this way: "On the cross of Calvary, Jesus didn't purchase general savability. He didn't die to make salvation possible. No, Jesus took names to the cross. He specifically and effectively died for you and me. His death was just as effective for us as if we had died ourselves."

But the gospel is even more than forgiveness of our sin and a right standing with God. The gospel also means that Christ defeated the power of sin in our lives. We are new creations, no longer bound to sin (2 Cor 5:17). God is not just for us and with us- he is in us! We will never face any situation without him.

Galatians 2:20 says it beautifully, "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the son of God who loved me and gave himself for me." What Christ did on Good Friday, his sacrifice and all its implications for us, is both humbling and overwhelming.

Christ took my name to the cross. He took the paper with all my sin and satisfied the wrath of God. And in exchange, he gave me his sinless record so that I can live with him forever. And because Christ dwells in me, I will never be alone. I am blessed with every spiritual blessing. My life has meaning and purpose. I am loved beyond all comprehension.

What should our response be to this outrageously good news? The last stanza of the hymn *When I Survey the Wondrous Cross* seems fitting:

Were the whole realm of nature mine,  
That were an offering far too small;  
Love so amazing, so divine,  
Demands my soul, my life, my all.